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## ABSTRACT

Composition education is not only about the development of students' written literacy skills; it is also about learning new ways to think and act both inside and outside the classroom. By understanding the ideological and social elements of teaching practices, teachers can structure their undergraduate composition classrooms in ways that better facilitate social justice by helping students analyze systematic oppression and collaborate with them to build a more just, equal, and peaceable society. At most universities, it is still somewhat rare to find teachers utilizing pedagogies that relate directly and explicitly to a social justice mission in their undergraduate composition classrooms. This paper summarizes some of the challenges facing teachers who attempt to promote social justice learning in composition courses, particularly at the first-year level. These four barriers are as follows: (1) the lack of pedagogical training resulting in teachers' being under-qualified to facilitate successful social justice learning; (2) the lack of time needed for teachers to individualize instruction to meet each of their student's needs; (3) the conservative opposition, both inside and outside the academy, that believes it not in its best interest to promote such a pedagogy; and (4) untenured or part-time faculty who legitimately fear cynical administrators, faculty, and students who oppose or resist a social justice mission in the composition classroom. Contains 15 references. (Author/RS)

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# Challenges in Promoting Social Justice in the Undergraduate Composition Classroom.

by David Alan Sapp

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**Title: Challenges in Promoting Social Justice in the Undergraduate Composition Classroom**  
**Presenter: David Alan Sapp, Ph.D., Fairfield University, USA**

## **Abstract**

Composition education is clearly not only about the development of students' written literacy skills; it is also about learning new ways to think and act both inside and outside the classroom. It is important for us as composition teachers to acknowledge that all educational practices imply an educational theory—a theory that ranges from being unjust and violent to being just and peaceable. By understanding the ideological and social elements of our teaching practices, we can structure our undergraduate composition classrooms in ways that better facilitate social justice by helping our students analyze systematic oppression and collaborate with them to build a more just, equal, and peaceable society. In this process, we can introduce our students to an active experience in democratic citizenship, help them become critically conscious of the world in which they live and work and analyze how these environments shape who they are.

The value to a social-justice approach to composition education may seem obvious. However, we must ask ourselves why it is still so difficult to find such approaches in practice at many of our universities and colleges. At most of our institutions, it is still somewhat rare to find teachers utilizing pedagogies that relate directly and explicitly to a social justice mission in their undergraduate composition classrooms. In this presentation, I summarize some of the challenges facing teachers who attempt to promote social justice learning in composition courses, particularly at the first-year level. These four barriers are as follows: 1) the lack of pedagogical training resulting in teachers' being under-qualified to facilitate successful social justice learning; 2) the lack of time needed for teachers to individualize instruction to meet each of their student's needs; 3) the conservative opposition, both inside and outside the academy, that believes it not in its best interest to promote such a pedagogy; and 4) untenured or part-time faculty who legitimately fear cynical administrators, faculty, and students who oppose or resist a social justice mission in the composition classroom.

## **Presentation**

Nearly a year ago, I submitted a proposal to CCCC based on my work promoting social justice in first-year composition classrooms. I intended to speak about how composition education is not only about the development of students' written literacy skills; it is also about learning new ways to think and act both inside and outside the classroom. I'd planned to point out how important I think it is for us as composition teachers to acknowledge that all educational practices imply an educational theory—a theory that ranges from being unjust and violent to being just and peaceable. By understanding the ideological and social elements of our teaching practices, we can structure our undergraduate

composition classrooms in ways that better facilitate social justice by helping our students analyze systematic oppression and collaborate with them to build a more just, equal, and peaceable society. In this process, we can introduce our students to an active experience in democratic citizenship, help them become critically conscious of the world in which they live and work and analyze how these environments shape who they are. However, given what's happened in the world during the last year (as well as the last few days) *the value of* a social-justice approach to composition education may already seem obvious to most of us.

At the time I submitted my proposal, I felt that I was prepared to talk about my work both at my current institution (a private, liberal arts university in New England that serves mostly white, well-prepared, undergraduate students from upper-middle class backgrounds), as well as my previous work at a open-admissions university in the border region of southern New Mexico, where I worked with mostly minority, first-generation college students. I had planned to talk about how a pedagogy centered in social justice assumes that student empowerment can be achieved through exploration and participation in social justice projects. And I thought it may be interesting, for example, to compare how these two very different student populations read and respond to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a text I typically use to begin my first-year composition courses in order to discuss issues of power and introduce ways that social-justice learning can lead to student involvement with broader social struggles.

Over the last year, however, circumstances have changed. Our government's actions have shaped what many of us we do in our composition classrooms, and many of my colleagues and I have struggled with feelings of anger, depression, sadness, and pessimism. During this week in New York, many of us ride the elevator and catch glimpses of terrible things on CNN, and I ride the train home each night and can't keep myself from reading newspapers over the shoulders of people sitting next to me. I've talked with colleagues who have told me "This doesn't feel right," referring to what they feel as they walk from session to session.

*But* a huge part of my struggle here today has to do with my reluctance to talk about my students in ways that may seem overly critical. I'm hesitant to admit that when we discuss *the challenges* we face promoting social justice learning in first-year composition, our students make easy targets. After all, many scholars have published reports about how our students seem so passive, cynical, apathetic, politically conservative, or politically indifferent. They point to longitudinal studies of students' postures in classrooms, their increased levels of absenteeism, and even the declining percentages of college-age *voters* measured back to the 1960s. And as much as we may want to raise our hands and shout, "It's not true! So many of *my* students are engaged, informed, and active," or

“Yes, *but* there are a few of them who are doing important work” (including a few of mine who are, at this moment, at the anti-war protests a few blocks south of here), it still seems that the number of students who participate in or actively think critically about struggles outside the classroom related to gender equality, participatory democracy, economic opportunity, intellectual freedom, environmental protection, or human rights is low, and we should resist (even if just for a moment) the temptation to point out individual students who exist as the rare exceptions, because to do so obscures the big picture.

Unfortunately, it is true that many of our undergraduate students are not prepared to participate in democratic education that aims to promote social justice. Why is this? There are many reasons, I think. Some of our students are skeptical, or even disillusioned, about the value of critical discourse, given their keen desire for firm “black-and-white” answers to social issues and their exposure to mediated versions in the form of TV talk shows. And it’s been my opinion that many of our students are not accustomed to participating in discussions about important social issues in a climate of *peer- and broader socially-policed* cynicism. While many composition teachers are accustomed to seeking public forums for social criticisms—by writing articles, attending conferences, consulting with activist groups, and attending demonstrations—many college students tend to still think of debate as argument in the popular sense (i.e., unpleasant, uncomfortable, and potentially silencing). In sum, one of the primary reasons why we fail to promote social justice learning in the undergraduate composition classroom is that most of our students have no experience in true democratic dialogue, and this prevents them from initially embracing these kinds of pedagogical approaches.

But again, I don’t want to use the brief time that we have together today to criticize students. In many ways, it’s our responsibility as teachers of first-year composition to promote social justice. Giroux argues that critical thinking skills are essential in the composition classroom in preparing students to “locate themselves in relation to a complex society.” Shor adds that classroom activities should be context-based and student-centered, leading them to question the cultural assumptions of society and imagine alternatives to the status quo. As social justice educators, we are responsible for fostering a sense of critical citizenship with the intention of creating a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their own lives, *not only* as critical thinkers and co-constructors of knowledge, *but also* as cultural agents, who, as Schön argues, are equipped with the skills to put reflections into action.

But, if I take a step back and think about why theory-driven social justice approaches to first-year composition do not result in more of our students being committed to voicing their opinions (either in opposition to or in favor of what’s happening in the world), where does that leave us?

Especially today, I'm not satisfied by a response that positions students at blame. I argue that most of our first-year composition students are actually not given the opportunity to learn how to participate as critically literate citizens. That being said, no, I'm not going to point my finger in blame at composition faculty either. Instead I would like to outline four barriers I've identified that seem to challenge the promotion of social justice learning in composition courses, particularly at the first-year undergraduate level. In the remaining minutes of this presentation, I will discuss these four barriers (which are listed in the abstract section on your yellow handout) and then offer one quick illustration of these barriers in action at my institution.

The first barrier concerns a lack of pedagogical training that results in teachers of first-year composition being under-qualified to facilitate successful social justice learning. Of course, this is *not* the fault of existing composition teachers, but a reality in many institutions that assign most of its sections of first-year composition to pedagogically-unprepared instructors. At my current institution, in effort to "be fair" and encourage the value of teaching composition, all of the full-time professors in the English Department are expected to teach a section of first-year composition each semester. I know other universities with this policy, and I am somewhat supportive of the intention; however, while many of these instructors may have experience in social justice, few of them (i.e., three out of twenty-something) have any formal academic training in composition theory or philosophies of education. The problem is that many teachers working in English departments are academically-trained in literature but are increasingly being asked to teach sections of first-year composition, despite having little, if any, interest in doing so *or* the educational training to do it well. Given that special knowledge, insight, and educational training are required of teachers who will carry out social justice learning, most existing first-year composition teachers are not only unqualified to teach according to a social justice approach, they are arguably unqualified to teach composition at all.

The second barrier to the implementation of social justice in teaching composition concerns a lack of time for many teachers to implement such pedagogy in order to meet the needs of all students. Most teachers find that it is harder, less efficient, and more time-consuming to teach according a social justice approach. Social justice educators are not technicians employed to implement rigid curricula, but they are intellectuals exploring their own and their students' lives. Since teachers who follow this approach must individualize instruction to each student's contexts and needs, teaching one composition course to twenty students *may seem* to require the same effort as teaching 20 courses. The resulting approach is often more time-consuming because it is broader in scope. It is process-oriented and emphasizes student exploration, not educational practices that easily fit into a series of 45-minute lectures. For example, some social justice educators focus learning instruction on issues related to



promoting change in their campus culture. They may facilitate students' community-based projects, build interdisciplinary coalitions with other faculty and students, and even directly involve students in their own social justice efforts (like the illustration I'll offer in a couple of minutes).

The third barrier concerns the conservative opposition. This opposition exists both inside and outside academia and is demonstrated by many administrators and conservative faculty who believe that promoting social justice does not serve their best interests. It seems that increasing numbers of our colleagues believe that universities need to reform curricula in order to better serve the corporate interests of the dominant society. These conservative scholars claim that there is a "crisis" in the current educational system—a crisis *not* caused by lack of participation in the social construction of knowledge by all citizens within a democratic community, *but rather* by the liberal educational reforms of the 1960s.

Burton and Robinson argue that this conservative opposition supports a somewhat-hidden motivation for the expansion of capitalist markets. It also supports the notion of traditional teacher authority in the classroom, and its curriculum emphasizes a narrow selection of skills, culture, and knowledge through an educational view that ignores diverse political issues concerning race, class, gender, or sexuality. This unjust education is a socialization process, teaching people to behave in relation to hierarchical power. It functionally trains workers for jobs that tend to be associated with different class positions, and it teaches students to consent to oppressive relations by legitimizing some forms of knowledge and not others. A *social justice education* aims to develop a critical citizenry capable of analyzing and challenging oppressive characteristics of society that have traditionally served the politically conservative.

At many universities, cynical distrusting administrators succeed in preventing the implementation of social justice education. McLaren delineates the "mudslinging against progressive educators" by many traditional administrators, some of whom in the 1980s and 1990s resisted the inclusion of programs such as women's studies, ethic studies, and queer studies into English Departments. Administrators commonly prevent social justice learning by setting unrealistic learning expectations, overemphasizing immediately-measurable student outcomes, and being impatient with student-centered pedagogies that teach to individual student needs. McLaren advises us that every step should be taken to minimize our "deep, angry resentment at the dismissive arrogance sometimes displayed by" these administrators.

Perhaps the bottom line is that implementing a social justice mission in the composition classroom *does not seem* to serve those invested in institutional interests. Perhaps under pressure to secure external funding, many administrators focus on entrepreneurial endeavors that increasingly

place business interests over academic ones. Nevertheless, especially in these market-driven times, we need to remember that our job is not to simply train students to enter the workforce; instead, our job has more to do with preparing students to become critically literate citizens who can participate in the democratic process. We should not succumb to the “factory metaphor” of education that tells us that the number of degrees a university grants is an accurate measurement of its productivity, or that by viewing our students as “clients” we will better “serve” their needs.

The fourth barrier to the implementation of social justice concerns untenured or part-time instructors who fear cynical administrators who oppose or resist social justice. Although I focused earlier on full-time faculty who regularly teach first-year composition, most of whom are trained in the study and production of literature, it has been well-documented that the majority of those teaching first-year composition are actually graduate teaching assistants, non-tenure track faculty, and others who have little institutional power or job security. Many of these teachers are therefore understandably hesitant to teach with methods or topics that seem controversial and fear punishment by non-supportive administrators.

Also, I’ve noticed that social justice approaches seem to be practiced with less frequency by graduate student instructors and emeritus faculty, perhaps because they may either be out of practice (in the case of some emeritus faculty) or unsure of their teaching abilities and perhaps have limited investment in the local communities (in the case of some graduate student teachers). As a result, these two groups of teachers often succumb to administrators’ pressures to teach first-year composition in traditional ways. And because the work of first-year composition instructors remains under valued in the academy, this is a particularly difficult barrier to overcome concerning the implementation of social justice in the first-year composition classroom.

I’d like to close this presentation with an illustration that, while it is not exclusively pertinent to those of us teaching first-year composition, it does show the risks some faculty take (and the punishment they receive) for adopting a social justice approach. A few years ago the administration at my institution outsourced the janitorial services, ostensibly to save money, although it actually happened in the middle of a unionization drive. Students and their faculty mentors had tried for several years to encourage the administration to listen to concerns about the treatment of custodial workers under the contractor, including low wages, no health care, and labor violations. This group of faculty and students joined with a labor organizer in a unionization drive to get our institution to adopt a code of conduct for contractors. According to our social justice mission, the institution had moral responsibilities to our indirect employees who provide services for us, although we do not hire them directly. In other words, our institution’s *profiting* from the contractor’s bad labor practices is



prohibited by our mission. The administration stonewalled for three years, refusing to meet with faculty and students to discuss the working conditions of the custodial workers. During this time, some of the students became increasingly vocal and active, holding demonstrations, handing out pamphlets at alumni events, and eventually taking over the administration building. In the end, the administration agreed to implement a code of conduct, which is extremely weak because it provides no vehicle for enforcement or review. But at that point, it seemed that the students and faculty had successfully participated in a meaningful and concrete social justice movement. In fact, later that spring, *Mother Jones* listed our institution as one of the top ten activist schools in the country.

But this experience had consequences. Later that year, the faculty director of our Peace and Justice program delivered a presentation in which he mentioned this movement at the *regional* conference on Justice in Higher Education. I understand that it caused a bit of a stir, and when it came time for the administration to pick faculty to attend the *national* conference on Justice in Higher Education, he (and many other faculty who participated in the “Justice for Janitors” movement) were excluded, despite considerable pressure such as all the faculty actually selected saying they would boycott it if he (and other faculty perceived as social justice activists) were not included. The faculty director of the Peace and Justice program told our academic vice president, “It looks like I’m getting blacklisted here,” to which the AVP replied “No, it’s nothing like that; it’s just that the conference is unrelated to your field.”

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### **Presenter's Biographical Statement**

DAVID ALAN SAPP (Ph.D. New Mexico State University, 2001) is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Professional Writing at Fairfield University. In addition to teaching first-year composition in the English Department, he also teaches graduate courses in critical studies in the Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions. His recent publications have appeared or are forthcoming in *College Teaching*, *Inventio: Creative Thinking about Learning and Teaching*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Issues in Writing*, *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, and *Journal of Communication*. He recently served as guest editor of a special issue of *Networks: An On-line Journal of Teacher Research*, a journal published by the Center of Teacher Development at the University of Toronto.



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